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SYRIA: Religious rioting in several northern cities, in which scores of persons were reportedly killed or wounded, may result in further delays in the proposed constitutional referendum and national parliamentary elections.

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[redacted] Press reports of the incidents claim that 39 persons, including 12 policemen, were killed and 80 injured in the demonstrations in Hamah alone, about 100 miles north of Damascus. Over 100 persons reportedly were arrested.

Militant Muslims demanded that the new draft constitution include a provision declaring Islam to be the state religion. President Asad's publicized proposal that the draft constitution be amended to provide that the president be a Muslim apparently was intended to placate the militants, but his proposal only heightened the tension. The religious leaders apparently interpreted Asad's proposal as further evidence that the government had no intention of declaring Islam to be the state religion.

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[redacted] The draft was approved by the People's Council in late January and was to be submitted to popular referendum to be followed by national elections within the next few months. These now may be postponed.

The new constitution, the first in 12 years, appears designed primarily to institutionalize the national socialist system in Syria and to legitimize the current regime. Although it provides for broader political participation and expression, it does not involve any substantial changes in the regime. Under the terms of the draft constitution, the controlling socialist Baath Party would remain the predominant party, and Asad almost certainly would continue as president.

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INDIA: The world supply of medicinal opium will be significantly reduced because of poor weather conditions in India, the only important licit exporter.

Production this year is expected to drop 10-20 percent from last year's output of 1,000 tons. Licit opium production in India is officially limited to two small areas in the north-central part of the country, where a severe water shortage and cold weather have hurt the poppy crop planted last fall.

In recent years, India has accounted for about 85 percent of licit opium exports and Turkey most of the remainder. Last year, following an agreement with the US, Turkey dropped out of the licit opium market. New Delhi, which has been cited by the UN for having a comparatively good opium control system, has tried to expand legal output to meet a developing world shortage of opiate drugs for medicinal purposes. Many Indian farmers, however, find that growing high-yielding wheat, which does not subject them to rigid government controls, also is more profitable and has less risk of failure than opium poppies.

The government apparently will make only a minor adjustment in its opium export price this year, despite a world supply shortage and India's need for foreign exchange. Last year Turkey raised its export price by 60 percent and India by 22 percent. When Turkey stopped producing, however, Indian officials declared they would not take advantage of India's monopolistic position to demand unreasonable price increases. Major US importers last week were informed that New Delhi plans to raise the contract price only enough to compensate for the devaluation of the dollar in relation to the pound sterling. Importers, in turn, want India to pay farmers more in order to encourage larger production. With inflation pushing up production costs, output is likely to decline further next year unless procurement prices are raised.

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